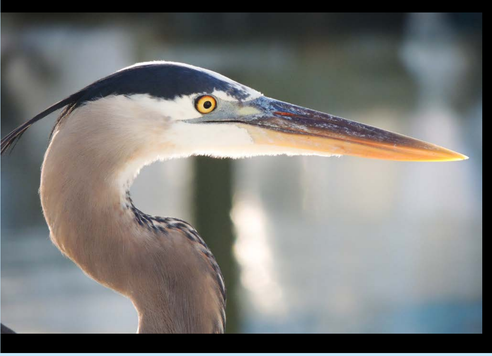
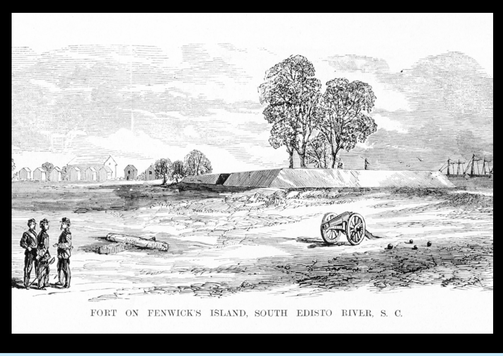
Welcome to South Fenwick Island

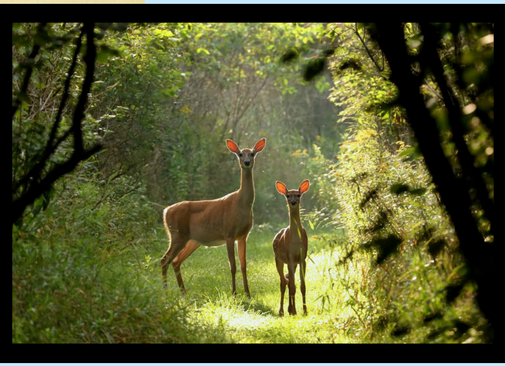
All around you lies the expansive beauty of the ACE Basin, a region defined by the Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto Rivers that represents one of the largest undeveloped estuaries on the East Coast.

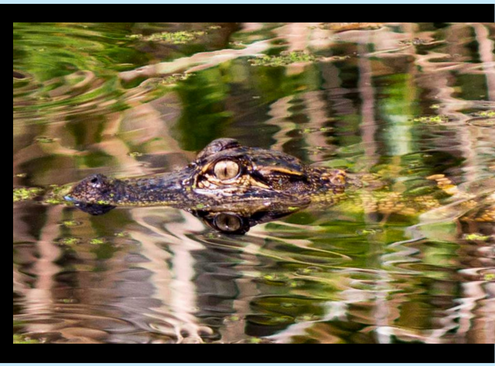
Before you, the Ashepoo River winds through miles of saltmarsh on its way to the Atlantic Ocean. Behind you sits South Fenwick, an island whose rich history and habitat diversity make it a gem of the Lowcountry.

Follow the island's trails to explore its past, learn about its many ecosystems, and catch a glimpse of its wildlife. This island is home to some of coastal South Carolina's most iconic animals, including white-tailed deer, American alligators, and wood storks.




FORT ON FENWICK'S ISLAND, SOUTH EDISTO RIVER, S. C.





This site is managed by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources as part of the ACE Basin National Estuarine Research Reserve, one of 29 such reserves across the country that conduct similar research, education, and stewardship for the special landscapes where rivers meet the sea.

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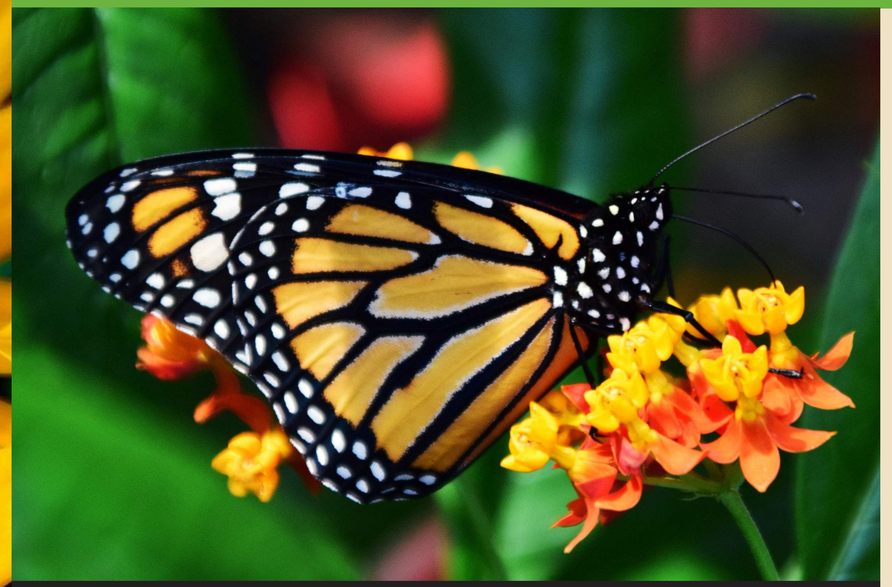
From Cattle Field to Pollinator Plot



Butterflies, bees, bats and even hummingbirds are all pollinators that help plants fruit and reproduce by moving pollen among flowers.

This former farm field is in the midst of a transformation into a native wildflower garden. Wildflowers do a lot more than meets the eye – in addition to being beautiful to look at, they also play a vital role in keeping our environment healthy and full of life.

The bright colors and sweet nectar of a wildflower field attract native pollinators such as bees, wasps and butterflies. Because they transport pollen from flower to flower, pollinators are critical to the reproduction of most plants, including those that produce the fruits and vegetables we eat. Unfortunately, many pollinators are in decline due to habitat loss and widespread use of pesticides. Wildflower plots such as this one can help by offering habitat where pollinators can eat and rest.

Pollinators aren't the only animals on this island that rely on wildflowers as a source of food – deer and migrating birds often stop to rest and refuel in wildflower plots, too. Native wildflowers can also help improve the health of the soil, which is especially important after years of intensive farming.

Wildflower plot made possible through a generous donation from the Judith Haskell Brewer Fund.

Star Tickseed
Coreopsis pubescens

Eastern Purple Coneflower
Echinacea purpurea

Black-Eyed Susan
Rudbeckia hirta

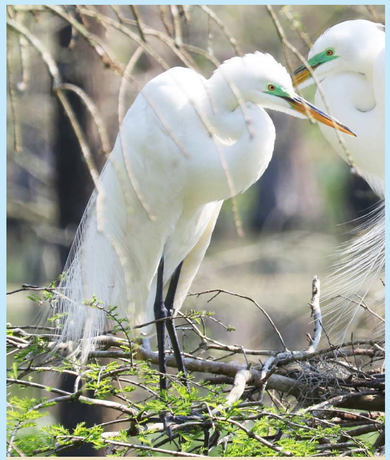
A Safe Haven for Nesting Birds

Rookery (*ˈro͝okərē*) —
a breeding colony of wading birds

In the warmer months, this island rookery is alive with croaking calls and flapping wings as birds and their mates jostle for prime nesting sites, construct large nests, and incubate and raise their young. In winter, wading birds may rest here between foraging trips for small fish, crabs, and insects.

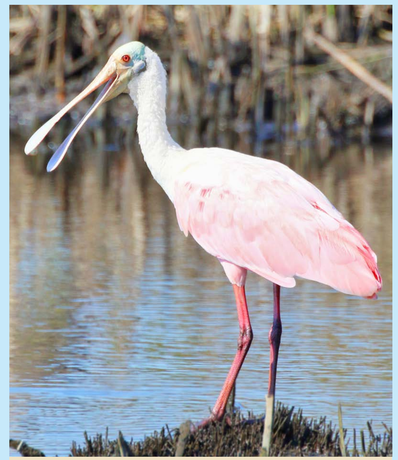
Note this rookery's position on an isle of trees – a typical location for wading birds such as these, which nest in large groups. The surrounding water and its resident alligators discourage predators such as raccoons from raiding the nests.

Great Blue Heron
Ardea herodias

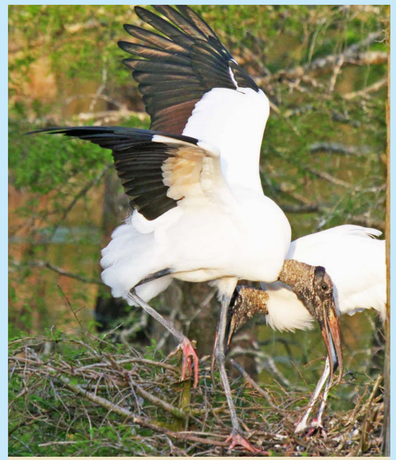


Great Egret
Ardea alba

Snowy Egret
Egretta thula



Roseate Spoonbill
Platalea ajaja



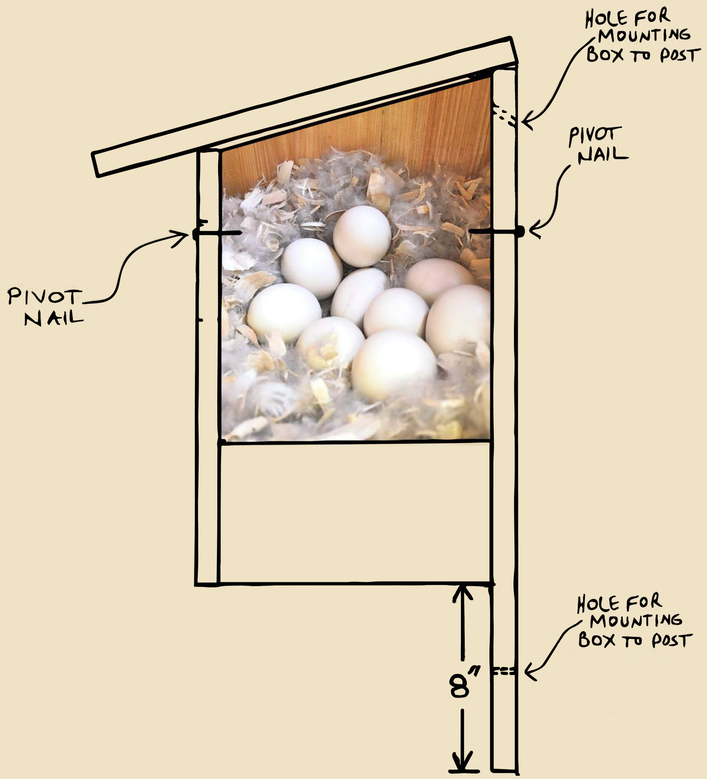
Wood Stork
Mycteria americana

Many of our coastal birds are in decline due to loss of habitat and disturbance from humans, which diverts their energy from important tasks such as caring for chicks. Please help protect these incredible creatures by admiring them from a distance. If your presence causes birds to fly, you're too close!

Above: Bird species you might spot on South Fenwick. Signage made possible through a generous donation from the Judith Haskell Brewer Fund.

What's in a Wood Duck Box?

"I have always experienced a peculiar pleasure while endeavouring to study the habits of this most beautiful bird," wrote John James Audubon of the wood duck in 1835. Found across much of the eastern United States, these birds are among our most colorful and unusual waterfowl – rather than other North American species, their closest relative is the mandarin duck of East Asia.



Around the turn of the twentieth century, woods ducks were at risk of extinction due to loss of nesting habitat and overharvesting for their striking feathers. But thanks to conservation efforts, including the widespread adoption of nest boxes such as the one here, wood ducks were a twentieth century conservation success story – and their numbers and range have continued to grow in recent years.

Unlike most waterfowl, wood ducks live in South Carolina year-round and nest in cavities such as tree hollows or manmade boxes. These nest boxes provide a safe place for wood duck hens to lay and incubate their eggs from January through summer, with metal cones below each box to guard against snakes and raccoons.

Female Wood Duck

Male Wood Duck

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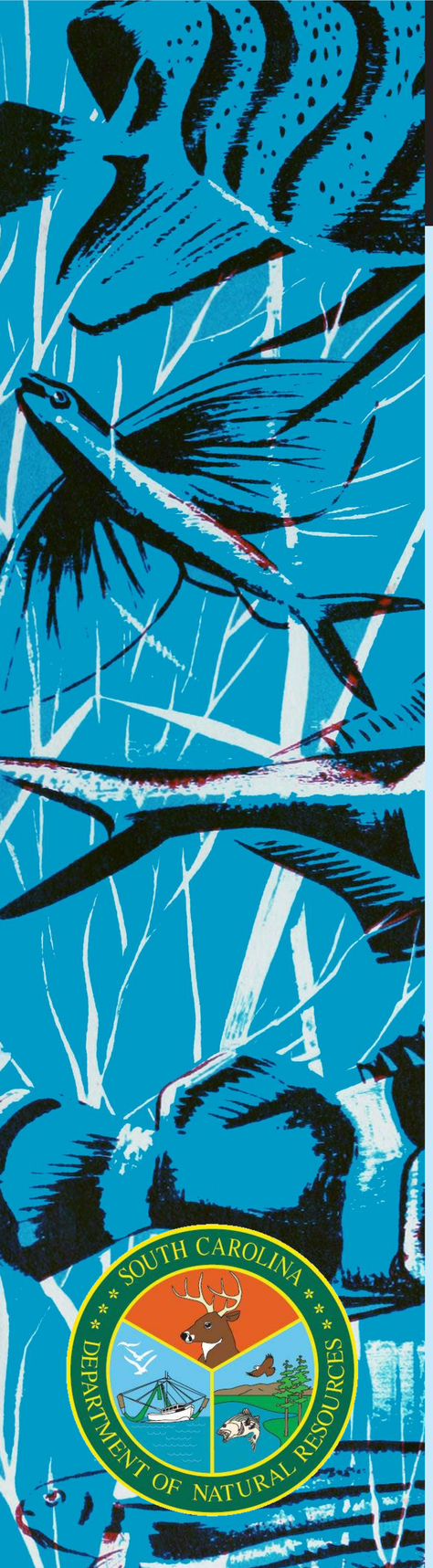
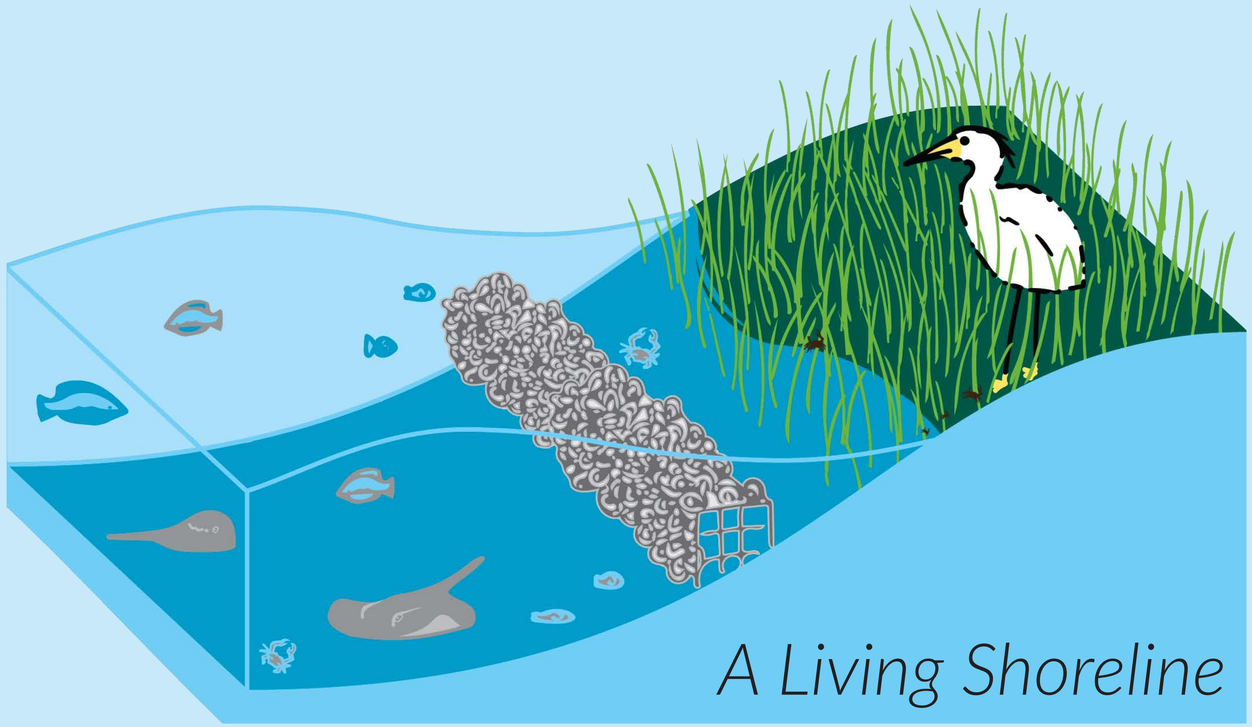


A Natural Guardian of the Shore

South Carolina's shorelines are ever changing. Storms, powerful waves, and sea level rise all threaten to reshape and erode these special places where the sea meets land.

Living shorelines offer a solution to shoreline protection, using oyster reefs and other natural materials (rather than hard structures such as bulkheads) to stabilize the shore. A living shoreline acts as a barrier between the water and land, where oyster reefs can absorb waves as they reach the shore. This allows marsh grass roots to hold sediment in place and prevent it from washing away. Living shorelines also keep our waterways clean; a single oyster can filter pollutants from 50 gallons of water per day.



A Living Shoreline

This experimental living shoreline, visible at lower tides, was constructed by SCDNR biologists and Clemson biosystems engineering students out of concrete-dipped, recycled crab traps, onto which young oysters will latch and grow. As the oyster reef develops, other creatures become attracted to the site, creating habitat for young fish, crabs, and other marine life.

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The ‘Lizard’ King of the Coast

Early Spanish colonists called the toothy reptiles that inhabited coastal Southeastern wetlands, marshes, and rivers *el lagarto*, or ‘the lizard.’ *El lagarto* appears to have given us the English term for the American alligator, the largest reptile on our continent.

Fast Facts

- Alligators range from North Carolina to Texas.
- These reptiles can live almost as long as humans.
- The average length of an American alligator is 13 feet.
- Female alligators protect their young for up to two years.

American Alligator
Alligator mississippiensis

Once overhunted for their meat and skin, the American alligator is now thriving throughout the southeastern United States. Alligators rely on the temperature outside to regulate their body warmth, which is why you’ll often see an alligator basking in the sun to warm up — or opening their mouths to release heat and cool down.

When temperatures drop in the winter months, an alligator’s biological processes slow down. From November to late February, alligators typically stop eating and create mud holes for warmth and shelter. These holes retain water during the dry season and provide habitat for other animals, making the alligator’s survival vital to other species, including fish, snakes, and turtles.

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The Smalls Family Legacy

A bateau leaves Halls Island, Beaufort, SC, ~1880-1910 (Courtesy of Beaufort County Library, SC)

Fifteen years after the Civil War, Fenwick Island was occupied by African American families that farmed rented land. That changed in late 1880, when farmer David Smalls became the first former slave and sharecropper to purchase land on Fenwick Island. Smalls lived with his wife Celia and their six children, growing Sea Island cotton, corn, vegetables, and livestock. In handcrafted bateaus, the Smalls family and their neighbors plied the Edisto and Ashepoo Rivers for fish, crabs, and shrimp. Over the years, a community known as Seabrook grew up around the Smalls family homestead.

After the 1904 construction of the Intracoastal Waterway split Fenwick Island in two, David Smalls opened a store on South Fenwick Island. He regularly traveled by boat to Beaufort, Charleston, and Savannah to obtain supplies for the store and to deliver goods grown on the island. Seabrook remained a quiet farming and fishing village for many decades, but by the 1960s, most of David Small's grandchildren had left their isolated island home for opportunities on the mainland and in northern cities. The remainder of the community eventually relocated just upriver to Bennetts Point, where some Smalls family descdents live today.

Community picnic in Beaufort, SC, 1939 (Courtesy of the New York Public Library)

Signs made possible through a generous donation by Judith Haskell Brewer Fund.

Livestock, Indigo, Cotton, & Rice

It's easy to imagine that South Fenwick Island has always been as wooded and wild as it appears today. But the landscape today is actually an anomaly in the island's modern history – for over three centuries, Fenwick Island was a working island dominated by agriculture. Through generations of coastal planters, enslaved Africans, freedmen, and Gullah families, this island was variously used to grow livestock, indigo, cotton, rice, and market vegetables.

Winnowing rice, Mulberry Plantation, SC, 1918 (Historic Charleston Foundation)

Farming at Bayou Bourbeaux Plantation, LA, 1940 (The New York Public Library)

The Project family picking peas, Flint River Farms, GA, 1939 (The New York Public Library)

Bringing a cow home from the fields, Belzoni, MS, 1939 (The New York Public Library)

Polishing rice in a hollowed-out tree trunk, Mulberry Plantation, SC, 1916 (Historic Charleston Foundation)

In the colonial period, the Seabrook and Fenwick families grazed cattle on present-day South Fenwick Island. But starting in the 1790s, the Sea Island cotton developed by South Carolina planters grew to prominence as the highest quality cotton on American markets. It grew best on sea islands along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina such as Fenwick, and, until the Civil War, was almost always grown by enslaved laborers.

After the Civil War, freedmen returned to Fenwick Island, where they and their deccendents continued to grow Sea Island cotton, corn, rice, and vegetables for many generations. Rice remained a staple of every meal and was farmed in the lower, wet areas of the island, where farmers did not need to flood the land. Families harvested rice with scythes, broke the hulls, tossed it using sweetgrass baskets, and polished it with mortar and pestle.

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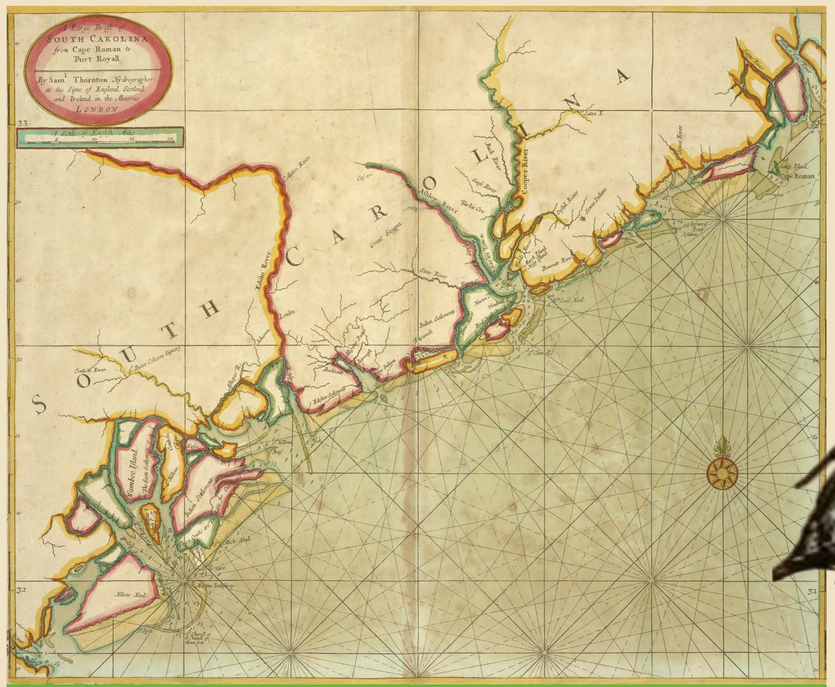
What Remains of King Cotton

Remains of the tabby foundation of the Seabrook Plantation main house on South Fenwick Island

Not far from the main Seabrook house stood a row of small slave dwellings, most likely constructed of wood or tabby. There, the enslaved people who cultivated the island's cotton slept, cooked, repaired their tools, and raised their families for several decades. Unfortunately, because Seabrook's will did not differentiate between the slaves of his multiple plantations, the number or names of the people who lived and labored on South Fenwick Island are unknown.

Signage made possible through a generous donation from the Judith Haskell Brewer Fund.

This tabby remnant is one of the few remains of South Fenwick Island's plantation-era history. In the 1820s, wealthy planter Ephraim M. Seabrook expanded his Sea Island cotton operations to South Fenwick Island. Seabrook built a house and settlement at the new plantation, to which this tabby foundation belonged. Tabby, a type of concrete made from lime, sand, and oyster shells, was a common building material in the Lowcountry before the American Civil War.



'South Carolina from Cape Roman to Port Royall,' created 1702-1707, Samuel Thorton (Courtesy of the New York Public Library)

Sea Islands at Risk

Barrier islands along the coast of South Carolina, U.S. Coast Survey of 1862

The sea islands are irreplaceable sites of history and wildlife. As the climate changes, barrier and hammock islands – and all the natural and cultural resources they are home to – will be increasingly vulnerable to sea level rise and high-intensity storms. That's just one of the many reasons why protecting places such as South Fenwick is so important; it will provide even more critical wildlife habitat as lower-lying lands are lost to rising seas.

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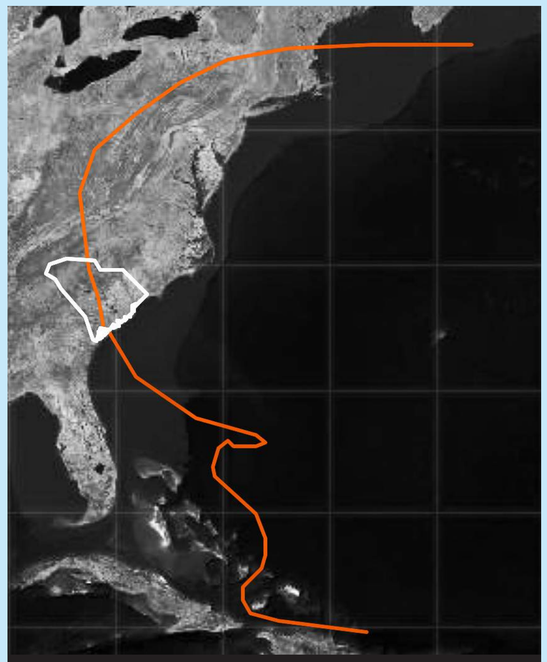
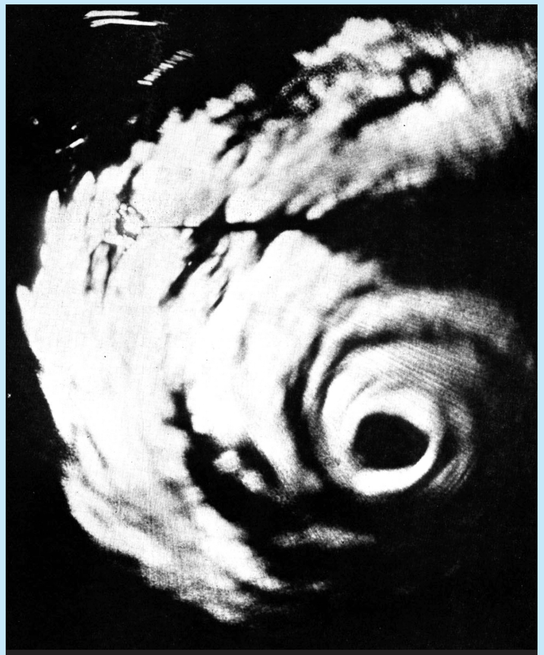
South Fenwick Island is one of South Carolina's many sea islands, the coast's first line of defense against storms. Barrier and hammock islands absorb the initial impact from hurricanes, buffering the mainland from storm surge and high winds. But these same features make these islands incredibly vulnerable, changeable places. In 1954, Category 4 Hurricane Gracie made landfall just over Fenwick Island, reshaping much of the surrounding land- and seascapes and destroying the island's only church. A string of tropical systems in the 2010s eroded the dike before you, making it unsafe for vehicle passage.

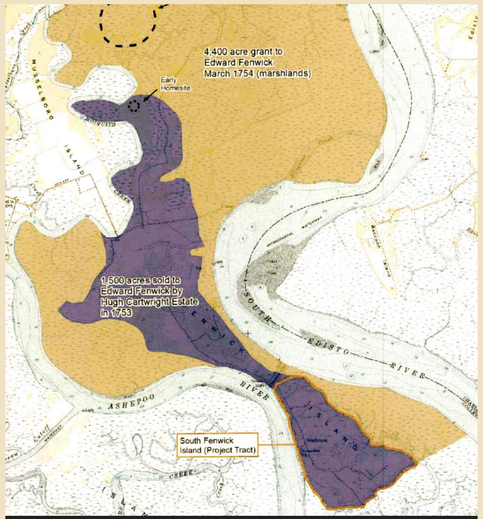


Hurricane Gracie Trajectory, September 1959 (SCDNR)



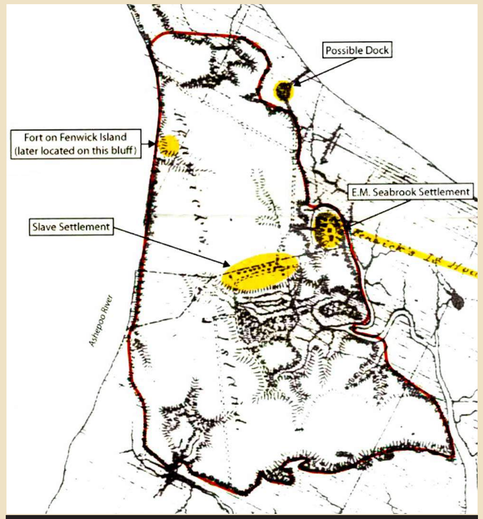
Radar of Hurricane Gracie, September 1959 (U.S. Navy)

Three Centuries of History



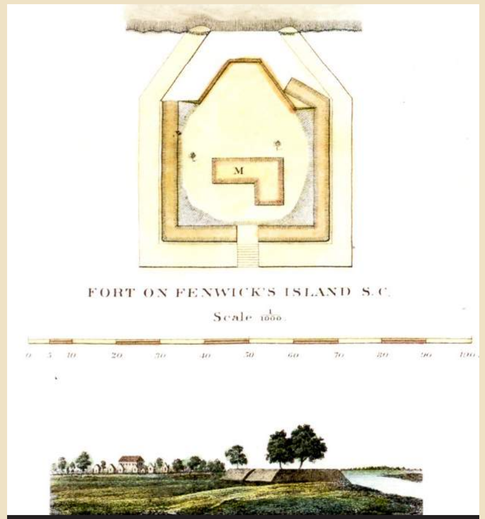
Colonial Period

In 1684, James M. Goulard de Verant received the very first grant of land in this area, spanning 1,000 acres. After many years in the family of Robert Seabrook, Edward Fenwick purchased the island in 1753 and received an additional 4,400-acre grant from the king. The island was hereafter identified on maps as Fenwick Island, and it was primarily used to grow indigo and graze cattle.



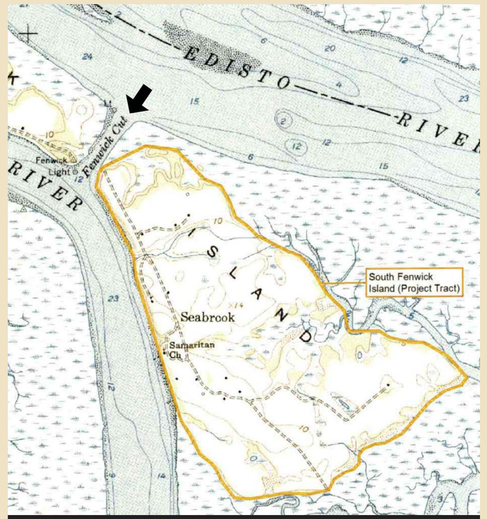
Antebellum Period

Brothers Ephraim M. and Henry Seabrook, wealthy Sea Island cotton planters based on nearby Edisto Island, purchased much of Fenwick island in 1821 and expanded their cotton-farming operation, bringing a permanent settlement of enslaved laborers to the island for what was likely the first time. The island was sold in two pieces after the Seabrooks declared bankruptcy in 1869.



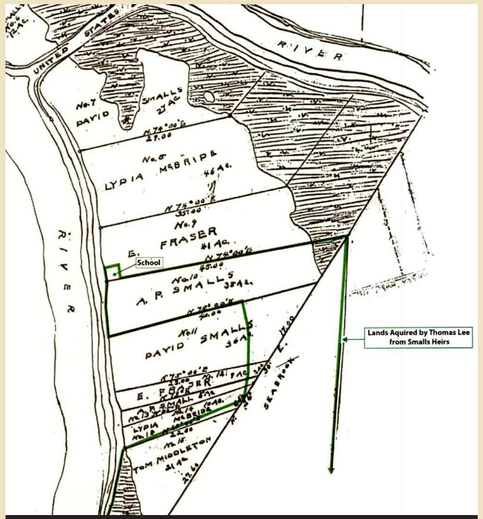
American Civil War

Early in the war, Confederate forces built a small earthen fort positioned on the island's west side, where a full battery could fire at vessels on the Ashepoo River. The fort was only used for a short time, however, as the land passed in and out of the hands of both sides throughout the war. The island's enslaved laborers were evacuated to Hilton Head during the war.



Beyond Reconstruction

In 1880, farmer David Smalls became the first African American and former slave to own land on Fenwick Island. He went on to become one of the island's largest landowners, where he led a quiet farming life alongside relatives and friends. In 1904, Smalls sold 24 acres to Army Corps of Engineers to build Fenwick Cut, which divided the island in half and created South Fenwick Island.



Twentieth Century

David Smalls died in 1907, leaving his land to nine heirs. For decades, a small Gullah community called Seabrook survived on South Fenwick Island; over time, Seabrook depopulated as people moved off the island. Parcels of the island became private recreational and hunting retreats in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2017, SCDNR purchased a portion of the Island from the Nature Conservancy, adding the property to other protected, public lands in the ACE Basin.

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